

PROFESSIONAL BRETHREN

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CHAPTER XI.

It is not often that conflicting emotions trouble me. But on that afternoon as I walked back to Mr. Goddard's house I experienced the strangest contradiction of feelings. One moment I thought I would pursue the tragedy no further, but decamp immediately and let my master work out his own fate. After all, he was nothing to me, and he probably cared less for me than I did for him.

But the next moment I would have a revulsion of feelings. I would fall to pitying and sympathizing with both my master and Miss Stetson. Her love for him was genuine, and it must be a terrific blow to receive such intelligence. Was she not to be pitied more than Mr. Goddard? On the other hand he was conscious of the terrible doom that awaited him and was buoyed up only by the thought that possibly Dr. Squires could cure him. But now he could never gain his prize. Would she marry him even though pronounced cured?

What would be the result? Mr. Goddard would go away to some foreign country, and after grieving over him for a time Miss Stetson would yield to the importunities of Dr. Squires and marry him. I saw the climax of the tragedy, which, after all, would prove a tragedy only to my master, and it made me more faithful in my devotion to the unfortunate man. This decided me to stay by him until the time should come when my expectations would be fulfilled. Then I would return to my old ways. Meanwhile I was leading an honest life and making the money which I spent.

I had become quite efficient in my duties, and was trusted in many ways that never fell to the lot of my predecessor. I was more than butler—I was my master's confidential secretary in many respects. But there were some secrets that he would not reveal to me, and one was the dread disease which brought him so much care and sorrow. After hearing the truth from Dr. Squires' own lips my attention was drawn more closely to Mr. Goddard's appearance. I watched his languid manners, his pale face and all the symptoms of disease that he showed during his periodical fits of sickness. More than this, I read up all the medical books about leprosy and then watched for the signs. To an excited imagination these were readily visible.

About this time Miss Stetson and the doctor took lunch at the house again, and my attention was called to the matter by an incident that greatly affected all of us. I had not seen Miss Stetson since that afternoon when I watched her from my hiding place at the wayside brook. She was paler than usual, and her manner was nervous and excited, especially when Charles was near her.

During the progress of the lunch I caught her studying the hands and face of her host on every occasion when his eyes were turned away from her. I could not at first understand the reason for this secret scrutiny, but it suddenly dawned upon me that she, too, had been reading on the subject and was looking for symptoms of the disease.

The doctor, as usual, was the life of the party and kept the conversation flowing freely from one to the other, never being at a loss for words. Nevertheless there was an uneasiness in his manner which seemed very unnatural. My master alone appeared to be perfectly at his ease and normal.

When the conversation lagged a moment, he suddenly rubbed the back of one of his hands with the palm of the other and said:

"Doctor, I think I must have run up against some poison ivy or sumac in the woods, for I'm sure that my hands and face are poisoned."

"Very likely, very likely," the doctor replied quickly, but with a little tremor in his voice. "There is a great deal of it around, and one of your nature would be very susceptible to it."

"My hands and face itch terribly, and blotches are breaking out on my face and forehead," Mr. Goddard continued.

I looked at Miss Stetson. She was staring at my master with horror written all over her face. The hand that held her fork trembled so that she had to put it down.

My master displayed his hands and said:

"See these red spots on the back of my hand. Are they not the result of poison? And over my eyes and forehead. They seem to be breaking out all over."

"Probably, Charles. I will investigate after lunch," the doctor said hurriedly, glancing toward Miss Stetson.

For the first time Mr. Goddard turned his eyes toward her. Feeling that she was attracting attention, her overwrought nerves could stand the strain no longer. She had been thinking as I had—that the brown spots were the first and earliest symptoms of leprosy. We both knew just enough to be carried away by any symptoms that resembled those which indicate the beginning of the dread disease.

"Belle, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

Mr. Goddard had hardly spoken these words before she dropped her hands and fainted. She would have fallen to the floor had I not caught her in time.

They deposited her on a couch and rubbed her hands and moistened her brow with water. She slowly recovered consciousness.

"You should not have mentioned be-

ing poisoned to her," the doctor said admonishingly to my master. "To one of her sensitive disposition the mere mention of a thing like that might cause her to faint."

"How careless and brutal of me," my master said in tones of repentance. Then as she opened her eyes he knelt down by her side and, drawing one of her hands into his, said:

"Did I frighten you? I was a brute to do it. Look at me, Belle, and tell me that you forgive me."

For reply she turned her head away from him with a shudder and withdrew her hand from his clasp.

"What is it, dear?" he continued. "Do not draw away so. Tell me what it is that I have done. I will do anything to repair it. Speak, Belle."

"Leave me, please; leave me," she gasped. "I'm nervous and excited. Let me alone for a few minutes, and then I'll be better. But I must go home. Doctor, will you help me to get on my things?"

"Belle, you're not going to leave me like this," pleaded my master, approaching her again.

But she moved aside and said in a wavering voice:

"Let me go now, Charles. Maybe I can explain some day. I'm not myself now. Goodbye!"

She did not extend her hand or offer to take his, but walked quickly out of the room.

Mr. Goddard stood quite still for some time, puzzled, perplexed, discouraged.

CHAPTER XII.

I WAS probably as much troubled as my master over this sad state of affairs. Miss Stetson's treatment hurt him more than he cared to confess. He seemed so perplexed and worried over the matter that I was several times on the point of telling him the reason for her sudden aversion from him.

There was but little doubt that he had noticed her dislike for him, but he was too proud and sensitive to mention the matter to speak of such personal questions even to Dr. Squires. For several days he remained away from the Stetson mansion, sending me out twice a day to inquire after Miss Stetson's health. I never saw her myself in any of these visits except the last. Then, instead of sending the message down to me by one of the servants, she called me up to her library.

The first thing I noticed about her was a peculiar careworn, suffering expression on her face. Under the dark eyes and around the lips there were delicate lines and tints which revealed more than words. She had suffered and was doomed to suffer more. Pathetic acceptance of her lot was apparent on every lineament of her face. She had evidently battled successfully with herself and had become resigned to her fate.

The room in which she ushered me was an old-fashioned library where her father, the doctor, had gathered together many rare books and curios. The heavy woodwork, the dark paper and furnishings of the library cast a gloomy aspect over the sole occupant, and her white face gleamed out of the darkness like an old-fashioned picture in a somber setting. In spite of her surroundings she was still beautiful—more beautiful it seemed to me than when fully exposed to broad daylight. Hers was a beauty that did not fade in light or shade.

"You come from Mr. Goddard with a message for me?" she said interrogatively as I entered the room.

"Yes, ma'am. He sent to inquire after your health." I replied, bowing respectfully.

"And he trusts you without a written message?" she continued.

"In this matter he does, for he considered you too ill to write, and he did not wish to put you to any unnecessary trouble."

"That is the true reason," she said quietly. "He is always very considerate to me."

"He is to every one," I added, wishing to show my devotion to him.

"Yes, yes; he is kind to all. He is a good man."

"I have never met a better, ma'am, if you will permit me to say it, and I've seen many kinds of men in the world. He is always thinking of other people, and if he does wrong I believe he has some good reason for it."

She looked at me as if she liked to hear me praise him, and when I stopped her expression seemed to say, "Go on, go on; it is music to me." But I knew my position and would say no more.

"Is Mr. Goddard well himself?" she asked when she found that I was mute.

"Yes. Except for an attack of poison, which has now gone away entirely, he has been very well."

She turned a shade paler and then flushed a little as she remembered that I had been present on the day when she fainted.

"Oh, yes; I remember he spoke of the poison the last time I saw him," she said in a moment, recovering her mental poise. "Have the spots or eruption entirely disappeared?"

"Entirely, ma'am. There are no signs of any left."

"I suppose Dr. Squires gave him something to cure them."

I knew that she was thinking of the doctor's cure for leprosy and that she imagined he had given my master something which would drive away the first symptoms of the disease, at least temporarily. But I knew differently, and I courted the opportunity to disabuse her mind of the mistake.

"No, ma'am; the doctor did nothing

for my master," I answered. "I gave him something which cured the eruption."

"You? What did you know about the matter?"

"Not very much, ma'am, except that I had been poisoned once, and I remembered what helped me. I asked my master to let me get him a bottle."

"A bottle of what?"

"With haxel. It was one of my mother's cures for poison from ivy or sumac."

"And that cured him?"

Her face brightened wonderfully. She began to realize that she had been a victim of her imagination.

"Completely," I answered. "Then it was not—nothing more serious than ordinary poison," she added, with a sigh of relief.

"Nothing, ma'am."

She gave expression to her relieved feelings in a short laugh. The sweet-



"You come from Mr. Goddard?"

ness of it made me turn my head to look at her. The beautiful face had suddenly lighted up so that it seemed almost divine in its expression. Here, I thought, was true love, and I willingly adored her for it.

"Pardon me," she said after a moment of silence. "I was thinking of something else which amused me. You must take a message to your master."

She walked toward the library table and drew pen and paper from a drawer. She hesitated a moment and then added:

"No; I won't write. I will send a verbal message by you. Charles has trusted you to bring one, and I will return it in the same way."

"Thank you, ma'am. I shall endeavor to prove worthy of the trust."

"Well, tell Mr. Goddard that I am quite recovered and that I expect to have him call on me today. Be sure to tell him that I must see him at once. He must give up every other engagement to come to me. Now, do you understand? Can you put it so he can't say no?"

"I can, ma'am, and I'll venture to give you my word of honor that he will be here before the sun sets."

"Go, then, and prove your words."

As I left her presence I felt that my mission had been one of mercy that morning, for I had, apparently unconsciously, been the means of lifting a burden temporarily from one heavy heart. I knew also that I carried a message that would bring a ray of sunlight into the life of another.

I might have stretched the importance of this interview to my master or I might have given him the literal truth. I know not which now. However, I delivered the message. It was sufficient to make him obey it.

The result of their meeting was manifest at once. Both of them appeared happy and normal again, and the old relationship seemed to be re-established. How much Miss Stetson explained to him about her fears and knowledge of his case I never knew, but for a time at least she was determined to put down all feelings of aversion for my master because of her knowledge that he was a doomed leper. Or perhaps—like another self-sacrificing virgin that I have read about—she had decided to consecrate her life to him, to live by him and nurse him through the coming years of pain and suffering and mental agony which must ever be the lot of a leper.

CHAPTER XIII.

I HAD now been in my position about six months. The interesting events which I have recorded had kept me from any longing to return to the exciting experiences of my profession. During this time I had grown somewhat stouter, and my countenance had begun to assume a kindly, benevolent, well-fed appearance. Necessarily I had grown a trifle lazier. Several times I had almost decided to return to my old methods of life, but a certain inertia, undoubtedly bred and nourished by my new existence of ease, always prevented. I would keep deferring the time until a more convenient period.

A genuine fear that I would lose my skill through lack of practice occasionally tormented me, but each time I put it aside with the thought that my profession was no longer an absolute necessity. It did not mean bread and butter to me as it did at one time. I was a full-fledged butler, and I could secure a good recommendation from my master any time I chose to leave.

Warned by my own experiences, I never let an opportunity pass to help a young man just starting on the downward road to get back to the main highway. I never entertained any serious thoughts of getting back there myself, but I hate to see others straying from it.

Nevertheless I now found myself slowly drifting back to an honest life. This had been accomplished through no choosing of my own. Circumstances again were responsible for this change. I did not make any resolves to remain idle for any length of time—in fact, I rather expected that the time would be brief.

As I just remarked, I never liked to see another, especially a young man, taking the downward road, and it was this strange feeling that gave me a little worry and anxiety in my idle life as butler for Mr. Goddard. I realized that my master was leading a double life; that he was pursuing his burglary

tendencies systematically, and that he was committing crime even while he was making love to Miss Stetson. This circumstance at first puzzled me; then it worried and irritated and finally disgusted me. I could not fathom its meaning. I saw my own crime, illustrated in him, in its true light, and it positively made me ashamed of my record. I longed to speak of the matter to him, but our peculiar relationship prevented it.

While I sympathized with him for the incurable disease which had always cast a blight over his young life, I soon learned to condemn him for his rash folly. No man of his position, intelligence and opportunities in the world had any business to stoop to crime. In some cases necessity may drive a man to the commission of a theft and habit may later deaden his conscience, but no such excuse could be held out for my master.

He was either bad at heart, a criminal by instinct, or he had a weak will that had been perverted by others when young and unformed. In everything else he seemed a model of strength, self-command and intelligence. Why should he be so helpless in this respect?

Since that first memorable meeting at the dead of night in the Stetson mansion no word or sign had ever passed between us which indicated that we knew anything of the other's criminal tendencies. Out of a sense of honor I kept my part of the agreement, and for some reason he remained uncommunicative about the subject. Nevertheless I longed to break the ice between us. If I could once more meet him when robbing a house, I would have the liberty to speak, and I would not again bind myself to silence.

Admiration for his skill, love for him as a man when not engaged in his professional work and a certain disgust at his deceptive, double existence produced strangely conflicting emotions in me. At times I felt that his crime should be atoned for and that if he should ever attempt to marry Miss Stetson I would reveal all I knew to her. Gradually his moral disease seemed more terrible to me than his physical. As a leper he was suffering for the sins of another, but as a criminal he was pursuing dangers and pleasures of his own free will which in time would entail suffering upon others.

A wave of moral reform swept over me for a time and possessed me so completely that I decided to make amends for my past deeds by trying to convert my master from his evil ways. If I could accomplish this, I should feel that my life had not been spent in vain.

Meanwhile I lived in the fear that he would be discovered. I knew from the reports that somebody was conducting a systematic series of burglaries in the neighborhood, and I did not hesitate to attach the blame to my master. Detectives were constantly prowling around at night to capture the robbers, but all their skill seemed to be without avail. A better testimony to the ability of my master could not be given.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN I reached the conclusion that something ought to be done to save Mr. Goddard from himself, I began planning the best course to pursue. First I would have to meet him at night under circumstances similar to our first meeting, and then I would have the liberty to speak to him. To accomplish this I watched him every night, often sitting up until nearly daybreak to see if he left the house. For nearly a week I followed this course, and I could swear that he had not left his bed after midnight.

On the seventh night he had an agreement to meet Dr. Squires at his office, and, feeling worn out with my unsuccessful vigil, I retired early and enjoyed a sound night's sleep.

That night a big robbery was committed not five miles from the house, and the following morning everybody was talking about it. When I heard the news, a terrible suspicion seized me. My master was using his alleged appointments with the doctor as a means to throw me off the track. I tried to trace back the dates of the various robberies, and I imagined that

I could establish a coincidence between them and Mr. Goddard's visits to Dr. Squires.

All that day my master was indolent and worn out, as usual, and I instantly attributed it now to his work of the preceding night and not to any poison which the doctor was administering to him.

When this light dawned clearly upon my mind, I knew exactly what to do. I slept soundly and peacefully during the next few nights, but about ten days later when my master announced that he had another appointment with Dr. Squires I prepared to spend the night following him.

He left the house about 8 o'clock. To my surprise, he did not take his horse, but walked leisurely down the road toward the old haunted mansion that the doctor had so long occupied. I followed him at a respectful distance, but he did not seem nervous or at all suspicious. He walked carelessly along, without once looking behind him.

He reached his destination about half past 8 and walked lightly up toward the house and entered. This did not astonish me, for I supposed that he really did go to the doctor's and probably submitted to some sort of treatment. His midnight marauding would begin after he left to go home.

I cautiously approached the house and tried to get a glimpse of the interior, but the blinds and shades were so closely drawn that I failed to get a glimpse of even the light. I contented myself with examining the burglar alarm, for at some future time I might find it useful to unfasten it from a window without giving an alarm.

The minutes passed slowly. Not a sound or movement from inside could be heard. Accustomed to waiting in patience for a long time, I did not find my vigil so difficult. I entertained myself in various ways to keep from falling asleep. A few moments of sleep

might spoil everything for me.

It must have been shortly after midnight when I heard the front door creak on its hinges. I was concealed behind some shrubbery at the time, where I could command a good view of the entrance to the house. The door, I knew, was opening, but no ray of light streamed through the crack. The whole house was, in fact, wrapped in darkness.

I saw the shadows of two men on the front porch, and by their general outlines I knew that one was my master and the other Dr. Squires. Neither spoke for some time. Then I heard the doctor say in a low, muffled voice:

"Now, Charles, the house is three miles below, and you ought to reach it in half an hour."

"Yes; I'll reach it in half an hour."

"You must be extra cautious, for there are many detectives around," the doctor continued.

"I shall be very careful."

"Then go and return as soon as possible."

They separated. The doctor stole noiselessly back into the house and my master walked stealthily down the gravelly drive toward the main highway.

His manner had completely changed. Every movement he made indicated suspicion and alertness. He was not nervous, but every faculty was strained. He was now the professional burglar on the scent. The slight breaking of a twig or the clinking of a pebble, I knew, would arouse and alarm him.

My prey was not an easy one to follow. He would stop and turn upon his tracks in the most unexpected way. His ears and eyes appeared gifted with wonderful powers of sensation. I had to increase the distance between us to avoid detection.

I managed to keep him in sight for about a mile, and then he suddenly gave me the slip. In some inexplicable manner he had dodged away from me and disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him. Chagrined at this being thrown off the track, I put all my energies at work to regain the lost trail. For two hours I wandered around, vainly trying to catch a glimpse of the man. I became so reckless that I would have exposed my person to him if it would have discovered his whereabouts to me.

Finally I gave it up in disgust. I seated myself under a tree near the highway and reflected. Certainly I was baffled for the night. I was on the point of returning home when the words of Dr. Squires recurred to me. The two were evidently engaged in the same criminal practices, and they would probably meet again that night somewhere.

With this thought uppermost in my mind I cautiously retraced my steps to the doctor's house. Once I thought that I had discovered my master again by accident, but upon closer observation I found that I was on the very point of receding a detective. An arrest at such a time of the night might lead to unpleasant complications, and so I remained half an hour hidden in the bushes until the man had disappeared.

When I reached the old mansion, everything was as dark and gloomy as when I left it to follow my master. There was not the sign of a living being around. I cautiously started to walk up the gravelly drive, and the crunching noise of my boots sounded clear and distinct on the night air. I just had time to drop down behind some shrubbery before the front door of the house opened, and the dark shadow of a man seemed to fit out of it. I remained perfectly quiet, not daring to move or scarcely breathe. Undoubtedly the noise made by my boots had attracted the attention of somebody in the mansion.

I remained in this reclining position for a full half hour. The shadow on the porch remained so perfectly still that I half imagined that it was an illusion or the reflection of some intervening object. But my policy has ever

been to make sure of a thing before deciding what course to pursue, and so I accepted the benefit of the doubt and waited patiently. Once or twice I thought of the tales of spirits and ghosts related about the old mansion and of how they walked through the empty rooms after midnight and made free with all earthly occupants. This did not disturb me, however, for I knew that somebody besides spirits was awake around the house that night.

I was getting tired of watching that immovable figure on the porch, and my eyelids were winking and blinking spasmodically when my ears caught a sound directly back of me. I did not dare move my head an inch, but the thought of the blood-thirsty Danes suddenly made me cold and clammy. I imagined I detected the patter of their

feet on the drive, and I gripped my revolver tightly, determined to make a desperate stand for my life.

A moment later, my feelings were considerably relieved. The steps approached nearer and nearer—softly, stealthily, delicate steps that might have been made by a child. Then the figure of a man loomed up within three yards

of me and moved swiftly toward the house.

But in that momentary glimpse I caught the features of my master. In his hands he carried a clumsy bundle or article, which I failed to make out. Then for the first time the shadow on the porch moved. The two men at the top of the steps and quickly disappeared in the house, the door closing noiselessly behind them.

I would have given much just then to have had the power to penetrate behind those wooden walls or to have raised the shades and looked into the doctor's office, where I knew that a light must be burning. But I felt that my quest was ended for the night and that further work would be useless. After waiting around another half hour I quietly stole out of the yard and hurried home to reflect over the strange occurrences of the night.

CHAPTER XV.

MY opinion of Dr. Squires did not improve any after the disclosures just related, and I was naturally inclined to lay all the blame upon him, arguing that he had misled my master in some way or that he held a price over his head and forced him to do his will. I took this view of the question for several days, upholding my master and reviling the doctor, attributing all sorts of evil intentions to him. Certainly he was as great a criminal as Mr. Goddard, and if one was ever caught in the act of robbery the other would have to be implicated. I felt that the doctor was accepting the easy part of the job, staying home to receive the stolen goods while my master ran the risk of capture and even of being killed.

In the event of the latter's arrest I knew that Dr. Squires would suddenly leave the neighborhood, and my master would be left to suffer the penalties of their mutual crime. Incidentally I decided to prevent any such unpunished by being on hand when the doctor found the place too hot for him. I knew enough about their partnership to have him sentenced to the state prison for a good long term.

My old hatred of the doctor returned with double force. I had more tangible reason for disliking him now than when I first suspected him of attempts to kill my master with poisons. My suspicions that he was not all above board in his lonely life in the haunted mansion were now confirmed. I would make it a point to investigate the premises in spite of all opposition.

Thereafter I coolly but deliberately went to work to effect an entrance into the old house, and that may be remarked, incidentally, that when a professional burglar of my standing makes up his mind to enter a building no locks, bolts, bars or electric alarms can keep him out. Moreover, I felt that I had justice on my side this time, and, re-armed with a quiet conscience, I made especially good plans.

It was three nights later that I found myself on the premises again. This time I was prepared for a work that had become a second nature to me. Leaving my shoes in a clump of bushes in the woods, I proceeded to approach the house with catlike tread. I reached the front porch without mishap. There was no moon out, and the place was extremely dark.

When satisfied that everything was quiet, I climbed up the largest piazza post and drew myself noiselessly upon the upper porch. Here I rested a moment and then crawled along the side so as not to make any crackling noise with the tinned roof. I gained the dark side of the house, and by placing one foot upon the staples which supported the blinds I deftly swung myself up on the slanting roof of the third story.

On the top of the house was a round cupola tower inclosed in glass, and I judged rightly that no burglar alarm would be attached to these windows and that noises made there would hardly be heard by the doctor and his old servant in their rooms below. I reached the cupola in safety and after resting a few minutes I proceeded to work.

In a few minutes I had cut out a small piece of glass from the window pane, and then, inserting my hand through the aperture, I easily unfastened the catch. I took the precaution, however, to be sure about a burglar alarm. There was none attached to the window, and so far I was safe.

Once inside the cupola, I flashed a bright ray of light from my dark lantern and inspected my surroundings. It was a small circular room with the accumulated dust of many years gathered on the window sills and floor. It was perfectly bare of articles of furniture and, as I judged, had not been visited by any one for years.

A trap in the floor opened into a hall below. I tried this door and found that it was locked on the inside. An ordinary lock is easier to pick than a padlock attached to a staple on the opposite side of a two inch board. However, I was prepared to encounter all sorts of difficulties.

I could work in comparative safety in the cupola. So I took a cold chisel and softly pried up the ends of the staple driven into the door from the opposite sides. When I had straightened these out, I forced the staple out of their holes. They fell back with a little clatter that startled me. Would anybody hear the noise?

I waited breathlessly for a full half hour, quivering my eye through the small holes to detect any ray of light. But apparently nobody slept in that part of the house, and the noise had done no harm. I tried the trapdoor. It stuck a little at the corners, but by prying it up with my chisel I managed to raise it without creating any noise.

An old ladder led from the trapdoor to the hall below. I tested it with my feet before venturing my whole weight on it, for I was not certain whether it was strong enough to hold me. Then I quietly dropped down into the hall.

At last I was actually in the doctor's house, but whether I would find what I wanted was another question. Before attempting any investigation I made sure of where the doctor and his old servant slept. Their sleeping rooms, I discovered, were on the ground floor. They opened into each

other, and both doors were standing on the jar.

This gave me the two upper stories all to myself, and I began my investigation with an easier mind. The first room I entered was empty, with the exception of a few old clothes, blankets and discarded furniture. The second was furnished as for a bedroom, but very little furniture was in it. The third and fourth were disposed of in a few minutes because of their barren appearance.

The large back bedroom which overlooked the woods was securely locked and the key missing. With fingers all of a tremble in anticipation of a great discovery I proceeded to pick the lock. Fortunately it was a common lock which required but little real skill to open. The spring was a little stiff and rusty, but otherwise it worked easily, and I threw the lock back in its socket without causing anything more than a slight grating noise.

Then I entered the room and closed the door behind me. I flashed the light from my lantern on every side, taking in the whole room in one circular sweep, and for a moment I was disappointed. There was nothing visible in the room except piles of old furniture covering it. It looked as if furniture had been stored in the room and then covered over with the cloth to keep the dust from accumulating on the articles.

But why should the doctor